

ACDI/VOCA: Gender Perspectives on a Voluntary Resettlement Program, Uganda

In 1996, the Office of Women in Development of the United States Agency for International Development launched a five-year project known as the Women in Development Technical Assistance Project (WIDTECH) to support gender integration in development policies and programs. WIDTECH's experience has underscored why it is important to ensure that women are equal participants in development, and how this can be accomplished. WIDTECH's small grants program, provided 27 grants worth nearly \$475,000 to non-governmental and community-based organizations worldwide. The following describes one of these projects, offering insights into the many ways that women are improving their lives and well-being, as well as those of their families, communities, and nations. Please visit www.widtech.org for more information on this and other WIDTECH small grants.

In 1996, USAID's Environmental Protection and Economic Development (EPED) Project launched an effort to strengthen the capacity of officials in Masindi District, Uganda, to monitor and protect natural resources. This work had a dual purpose: to make progress in poverty eradication through natural resources management and rural extension services and to reverse environmental degradation.

One of the activities undertaken to achieve these goals was a voluntary relocation of about 1,000 people who were encroaching on the Karuma Wildlife Reserve and conservation area. Agricultural Cooperative Development International/Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance (ACDI/VOCA) manages the relocation project with funding from USAID. In 2001, ACDI/VOCA received support from WIDTECH to assess the lessons learned from the relocation program with a particular emphasis on gender-related impacts and trends.

The study took place in two villages and used both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. In addition to an extensive literature review, interviews were conducted with the members and hosts of relocated households (husband, wife, and children), local community leaders, and district representatives.

Questions focused on aspects of relocation in general and gender dimensions of the experience specifically. In addition, focus-group discussions were conducted with men, women, and youths. Finally, EPED reports provided background information on the types of economic and environmental activities pursued by individuals and communities during and after the relocation process, as well as extensive demographic, health, and education data on the study population.

Findings and Results

- Upon relocation, many women began to see themselves as joint owners of the newly allocated land, offering an opportunity to strengthen traditionally weak landownership rights for women.
- Women frequently reported changes in household gender relations following relocation, which in turn led to improved household welfare. Spouses now spent more time together, men were drinking less, and most women were no longer required to seek permission from their husbands to access family land. Many women reported that community projects had helped them learn to express themselves in public and participate in local decision-making.

Lending Stability to Marriages

"Women used to fight with their husbands in order to get salt. But since relocation to this area, things have changed. Basic household necessities, such as soap, salt, and additional food such as meat and fish, are easily met without much household tussle and hustle. Thanks to EPED for spearheading sensitization and educational programs. The harassment of women by their husbands is now a thing of the past."

—Woman interviewed in a resettlement village

- Training in farming methods and expanded extension services for relocatees resulted in increased farm productivity and, therefore, greater land tenure security. Both these pursuits were conducted with sensitivity toward gender-related issues and patterns in local communities.
- The ACDI/VOCA project provided training in participatory approaches and the integration of gender into policies and programs for staff, local and district leaders, and local residents in and around the resettlement villages.
- An emphasis on stakeholder involvement and participatory decision-making by ACDI/VOCA taught local residents the importance of consulting women on both family affairs and community projects (such as road-building and the restoration of forest and water resources).
- Infrastructure projects in resettled communities—including better roads, health and education services, and access to safe water sources—improved the quality of life. These efforts, as well as the formation of women's groups, benefited women greatly, primarily by easing labor burdens and mitigating health problems such as maternal mortality.

Conclusions

The process of being uprooted from one's land and home and relocating to a new place is stressful and challenging. The EPED project's approach enabled individuals and communities to overcome many barriers and led to both poverty alleviation and environmental protection.

The ACDI/VOCA project underscored the importance and potential of paying attention to the different ways that men and women experience and address relocation. The findings of the study offer insight into how, when consulted and involved in decision-making, women can play a key role in both environmental protection and community development. Community action plans developed with the equal involvement of men, women, and youths are clearly fostering the understanding and practice of sustainable development in Masindi.

Resettlement and relocation have become increasingly widespread as economies shift, human populations grow, and the need to protect natural resources becomes more acute. The findings of this project form a basis for future discussions on the integration of gender concerns in these processes.

Bibliography

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